

US leads push for Kosovo independence

Paul Mitchell
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Following his meeting with Albanian Prime Minister Sali Berisha Sunday, President George W. Bush declared he would push for Kosovan independence. “The question is whether there’s going to be endless dialogue on a subject that we’ve already made up our mind on,” he said. “I’m worried about expectations not being met in Kosovo. And therefore we’ll push the process.”

The issue of Kosovan independence is inflaming great power relations, splitting Europe, threatening further instability in the Balkans region and emboldening secessionist movements elsewhere to press for independence.

Kosovo became the subject of a bitter public clash between the United States and Russia in the run-up to last week’s G8 summit. The clash—one amongst many—reflected a growing confrontation between the US, which is asserting its power in former Soviet republics and spheres of influence, and a Russian regime, encouraged by rising oil revenues and the crisis in Iraq, seeking to realise its own aspirations as a regional and world power.

Last week, US State Department official David Kramer, deputy assistant secretary for European and Eurasian affairs, claimed, “We see Kosovo as, *sui generis*, a set of circumstances not found in any other conflict,” and added, “We also hope that Russia does not invoke Kosovo as a basis for intervention in other places along its borders—for that would be a most dangerous game to play.”

US Ambassador to the United Nations Zalmay Khalilzad also said the US was going to push the UN Security Council to vote this week on a new resolution granting Kosovo internationally supervised independence from Serbia. Belgium’s UN Ambassador Johan Verbeke, who holds the rotating council presidency for June added, “We’ll see how the situation will evolve.... For the time being, it’s a wait-and-see period; it’s a question of days, not weeks.”

With reports that a vote on the resolution could be delayed, Great Britain, France, Italy, Belgium and Slovakia said they supported the resolution, whilst Russia and China are opposed to it. According to Human Rights Watch, “If the UN Security Council fails to approve the plan, then Washington could turn to Plan B: unilateral recognition by the United States, the United Kingdom, and then other states.”

Russian President Vladimir Putin insists that there can be no resolution of the province’s status without the agreement of Serbia, whose loss of sovereignty over Kosovo “does not correspond to moral or legal norms.” He told Prime Minister Vojislav Kostunica of Serbia that he was “pleased” he had thwarted the independence plan at the G8 summit.

Putin told reporters, “If we are to put ethnic self-determination ahead of national integrity, then this approach needs to be

universal in its application—it needs to be applied in other regions of the world, at least in other regions of Europe. Our partners’ claims that Kosovo is a unique case are not convincing to us. There are no reasons to believe that the Kosovo case is different in any way from the situation in South Ossetia, in Abkhazia, or in Trans-Dniester.... This will provoke separatist movements in Europe itself, in Scotland, in Catalonia, in the Basque country, in the Balkans, Republica Srpska.”

Russia may yet be prepared to jettison its ally, Serbia, should it be able to wring concessions from the US and the European Union. It has been a member of the so-called Contact Group, along with the US, Britain, France, Germany and Italy, which ruled out every option other than secession in January 2006. Press reports also suggest that Russia along with China then told US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice they would probably abstain on a resolution granting independence. More recently, reports indicate Russia floated the idea of cooperation over Kosovo with the US in exchange for withdrawal of its planned missile shield in talks with Rice in Moscow in May.

Since 1999, the province of 2 million people has been administered as a protectorate under the terms of Security Council Resolution 1244, which formally recognised Serbia’s sovereignty over Kosovo while simultaneously placing it under the occupation of foreign troops governed by an unelected UN viceroy.

The new resolution is based on the plan drawn up by UN special envoy and ex-Finnish prime minister Martti Ahtisaari. He declared, “Independence is the only viable option for a politically stable and economically viable Kosovo,” adding, “I propose the exercise of Kosovan independence...be supervised and supported for an initial period by international civilian and military presences.”

Ahtisaari has played a central role in the Balkans. He presided over the Western effort to force Serbia to accept the terms of its withdrawal from the province in 1999 following the NATO bombings. He then became chairman emeritus of the International Crisis Group (ICG), a Brussels-based foreign policy organisation funded by big business and staffed by former ministers and high-ranking military officers that has spearheaded the plans by the major powers to formalise Kosovo’s status as an “independent” state subservient to their interests and demands.

Formally, the new resolution is needed to terminate the mandate of the current UN mission in Kosovo and transfer control to the EU along the lines of the set-up in neighbouring Bosnia-Herzegovina. An International Civilian Representative, also known as the EU Special Representative, will be appointed by an International Steering Group and will have the power to overturn

laws passed by the Kosovan parliament and remove public officials. A European Security and Defence Policy Mission will “monitor and advise” on all areas related to public order, and a NATO-led International Military Presence will patrol the streets.

The Ahtisaari plan was approved by the parliament in Kosovo but rejected by the province’s Serb minority and the Serbian government.

Kosovo Albanian leaders said they expect independence “very soon” and last week launched a competition to create a new flag and anthem. Kosovan Prime Minister Agim Ceku declared, “Our symbols need international legitimacy” and warned against any delays. Berat Buzhala, editor of the Kosovo daily newspaper *Express*, also condemned further delays, warning, “It would be unwise to expect rational behaviour from a desperate and disillusioned society.”

Earlier this year, several thousand Kosovo Albanians demonstrated against the Ahtisaari plan, saying it fell short of full independence and made too many concessions to the Serb minority. Two demonstrators were killed after UN police fired rubber bullets, leading to the resignation of the UN police chief and Kosovan interior minister.

More than two thirds of Kosovo’s Serbs have fled the province, and the divided city of Kosovska Mitrovica, where the river Ibar separates an Albanian enclave on the southern side from a Serbian one in the north, remains extremely volatile.

Serbia already has the largest refugee population in Europe. This is under conditions of 30 percent unemployment and where analysts say another decade is needed to raise per capita GDP to 1989 levels. Balint Pastor, leader of the Vojvodina Hungarians Union, warned about a new wave of refugees into the Serbian province of Vojvodina saying, “We all know very well, with experience from the 1990s, that those refugee colonies moved to Vojvodina in great numbers, firstly in the northern regions, populated mostly with Hungarians and other ethnic minorities.”

Pro-Western Serbian President Boris Tadic has warned the EU that its vision of a separate Serbia and Kosovo was implausible. Prime Minister Vojislav Kostunica warned that if “the Albanian separatists use the failure of the resolution as an excuse to unilaterally declare the province independent,” the Serbian government would instantly declare it invalid. The sovereignty of Serbia over Kosovo was restated in Serbia’s recently adopted constitution and confirmed by the Serbian National Assembly, whose largest party, the ultra-nationalist Serbian Radical Party, has advocated keeping Kosovo by force if necessary.

The European powers have tried to buy off Serbian opposition to Kosovan independence by resuming talks with Belgrade over EU accession. These had stalled over Serbia’s failure to arrest former Bosnian Serb General Ratko Mladic, who is wanted on genocide charges by the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia at The Hague. The recent arrest of the Balkans’ third-most-wanted man—Mladic’s aide, Zdravko Tolimir—became the pretext for restarting negotiations last week.

However, independence for Kosovo is also opposed by EU member states such as Spain, Romania, Greece and Cyprus—primarily because of the impact it will have on nationalist and secessionist movements in their own countries. Slovakia is

also opposed to Kosovan independence (it has a large Hungarian-speaking minority), but Prime Minister Robert Fico made it clear that it would vote for the resolution because “If the resolution does not pass, some countries will take one-sided steps in making Kosovo independent. That would lead to destabilisation. We want the resolution to protect Serbia’s interests and to give the international community a high level of influence in Kosovo,” he added.

The push towards a Security Council vote has led to a renewal of calls for independence by several of the world’s 50 secessionist movements.

The leaders of Abkhazia, Sergei Bagapsh, and South Ossetia, Eduard Kokoity, which broke away from Georgia in the early 1990s after wars with Tbilisi, restated their claims for international recognition should Kosovo secede. To date, Russia has avoided recognising their independence or considering their appeals to join Russia. Kokoity said, “We are watching the situation, and we believe Moscow will not remain indifferent to what is happening and what precedents are being created when major deals are violated by the West.”

A parliamentary spokesman for the Basque Nationalist Party, the main party in the Basque region of northern Spain, sees the Kosovo plan as “a very positive development.... We think this could be a very good precedent, and someday we could aspire to something similar.”

After eight years as a UN protectorate, social misery, corruption, lawlessness and ethnic division dominate everyday life in Kosovo and affect ordinary working class people of Serbian and Albanian descent alike. The province is, and will continue to be, subject to the diktats of international financial institutions and foreign powers, the most aggressive of which, the US, has built its largest overseas military bases since Vietnam in Camp Bondsteel.

All of the political parties are implicated in corruption and the black market, which have flourished since the civil war. The mafia networks that smuggled arms to the Kosovo Liberation Army in the late 1990s have become a conduit for trade in contraband goods, narcotics and trafficking in women and children.

The bombing of Serbia in 1999, just as with the war that was to follow against Iraq, was never based on “humanitarian” or “democratic” concerns but was rooted in the drive of the US corporate elite to dominate world markets, control raw materials and exploit new sources of cheap labour.

The Clinton administration was able to enlist liberals and radicals in building a constituency for a “moral” use of military force. But the “human rights” war launched by Clinton and the “war against terrorism” initiated by the Bush administration four years later have the same underlying policy of exploiting US military power to assert the dominance of American imperialism in geo-politically strategic regions of the globe.



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